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Editorial: Learning from Tolkien

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EDITORIAL

LEARNING FROM TOLKIEN

Many of us can share anecdotes about ourselves on our coming to read Tolkien, or our first reaction to it.

I first read The Hobbit and The Lord of The Rings in 1957-58 when I was a Junior in High School. I had been a quiet and introspective adolescent, who had begun an enjoyment of science fiction, and had as friends a small group of science fiction readers at my high school. I was nearly the last one in the group to read Tolkien. I had neither much read nor much liked fantasy before then, having absorbed our culture's general distrust of fantasy as being "irrational" and "escapist" of our "realistic" problems. I also was very reluctant to start a work with The Hobbit as a kind of prologue to the main body, three volumes long!, my attention span up to then capable only of the short stories in science fiction magazines.

The Hobbit had a quality to it I had never read before, and sufficiently motivated me to go ahead and take the plunge. All the time the others in our small coterie of about eight were encouraging me, talking about all I was to yet meet: the Nazgul, Bombadil, Moria, Lorien, Rohan, Gondor, and Mordor.

I count the reading of The Lord of The Rings as the first in the series of experiences that one would call pivotal; one of those larger-than-life things that you know will affect you from then on.

I won't try to give a detailed description of my initial reaction to Tolkien. For many reasons I was not equipt to handle what I read, being definitely not socially aggressive; more sheltered than not, and naïve. Tolkien reached me, but much of it by-passed the intellectual process and went directly to the subconscious where the impressions were weighed in the balance by a kind of inner sense of honesty and objective reality that seems to inately reside there.

Tolkien captured a quality I had never read before, yet my inner-knowing identified with it. My imagination was excited. I eagerly read all the other-world fantasies available, but they didn't quite have that certain essence and quality Tolkien had. Then one of the friends in the group recommended the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis. My adolescent snobbery was reluctant to "lower myself" to read children's books. (I had justified The Hobbit on the basis of a prologue.) But my imaginative curiosity could not be restrained. How strange it was to re-discover the secret and incommunicable thread of delight in Lewis' Narnia books and soon after in the "Ransom" trilogy, which I had only known before in Tolkien. It was not until years later that I found that Lewis and Tolkien were very close friends for all of their adult life. From Lewis' other writings, he introduced me to several writers who also had this thread of special "joy."

One of the very major things that impress me about Tolkien is his intense and deep integrity. It is evident to me from his writing. A man who took fourteen years to finish his magnus opus, his world-view, is the furthestest from the "hack" writer that I can think of. It is obvious he wrote neither for fame or money.

We, by the way, owe a great deal to C.S. Lewis, for it is highly probably without his agency that we would have never read Tolkien. It was Lewis who unceasingly urged and prodded Tolkien to submit The Hobbit to a publisher. Tolkien was sure no publisher would be interested. Lewis has told us that his best friend is a "perfectionist and procrastinator," and that "you have no idea with what laborious mid-wifery we got the Lord of the Rings out of him!"

I sense that Tolkien wrote The Lord of The Rings because he had to. That is an inner sense kept him going to express a distilled version of all the experiences and knowledge and learning that life had poured into him. He created, much in a way that all artists create: to bring out and say, what is very real to them inside. Those who have interviewed or written Tolkien to ask what is the meaning behind his work, he has denied any hidden meaning. He has to say this to politely put down the impertinent blindness of the question. Those who ask have missed the glorious forest while inspecting the detailed trees. Tolkien is right; there is no hidden meaning. The meaning is in the experience of reading. Some find it; some do not.

I have wondered what he must have felt when back in the middle 50's he was greatly praised and suddenly made popular. Then again I wonder what he thought when his books finally came out in paperback, and there occurred what we call now the "Tolkien phenomena" or explosion, and people we writing articles in popular magazines wondering what was happening to their children. He probably finds his youthful admirers in America incomprehensible, since I think he probably has

not kept up with the social and political changes in this nation in the last fifteen to twenty years, nor is it that important to him. I fear he thinks that the real essence of his work has not been grasped in our chaotic condition, and who could blame him, with all the sophomoric popularization that has gone on. But what he has to say is comprehended by many here, will have many healthy reverberations in ways we do not yet fully know.

To me, The Lord of The Rings is a sustained impersonal and professional statement of the man's personal philosophy and belief. What is implicit in The Lord of The Rings is explicit in his essay "On Fairy-Stories."

When I first read Tolkien, it was the prolonged suffering of Frodo and the later resultant joy, that helped me break an all-encompassing sense of bitter cynicism and adolescent sense of futility, and made room in my mind for the possibility of eucatastrophe. For that I shall be eternally grateful.

READING LIST

A LIST OF FICTIONAL AND MYTHIC WORKS BY THE THREE AUTHORS
DISCUSSED IN THE MYTHOPOEIC SOCIETY

J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The Hobbit. London: Allen & Unwin. New York: Houghton Mifflin; Ballantine*.

The Lord of The Rings. Vol. I, The Fellowship of The Ring; Vol. II, The Two Towers; Vol. III, The Return of The King. London: Allen & Unwin. New York: Houghton Mifflin; Ballantine*.

"Leaf by Niggle," a short story, being the second half of Tree and Leaf, which also contains his essay "On Fairy Stories." London: Allen & Unwin. New York: Houghton Mifflin; Ballantine*, (as part of The Tolkien Reader).

Farmer Giles of Ham. London: Allen & Unwin. New York: Houghton Mifflin; Ballantine* (appearing both in The Tolkien Reader and Farmer Giles of Ham and Smith of Wootton Major).

The Adventures of Tom Bombadil. New York: Houghton Mifflin; Ballantine* (as part of The Tolkien Reader).

Smith of Wootton Major. London: Allen & Unwin. New York: Houghton Mifflin; Ballantine* (as printed in Farmer Giles of Ham and Smith of Wootton Major).

C.S. LEWIS

The Chronicles of Narnia

The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe. London: Geoffrey Bles; Puffin*. New York: Macmillan.

Prince Caspian. London: Geoffrey Bles; Puffin*. New York: Macmillan.

The Voyage of The Dawn Treader. London: Geoffrey Bles; Puffin*. New York: Macmillan

The Silver Chair. London: Geoffrey Bles; Puffin*. New York: Macmillan.

The Horse and His Boy. London: Geoffrey Bles; Puffin*. New York: Macmillan.

The Magician's Nephew. London: Bodley Head; Puffin*. New York: Macmillan.

The Last Battle. London: Bodley Head; Puffin*. New York: Macmillan. Note: This one is the last of the series, and should be read only after reading the other six.

The "Deep Space" or "Ransom" Trilogy

Out of the Silent Planet. London: Bodley Head; Longmans (with introduction and notes by David Elloway). New York: Macmillan*.

Perelandra. London: Bodley Head. New York: Macmillan*.

That Hideous Strength. London: Bodley Head. New York: Macmillan*.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

The Novels

Many Dimensions. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans*.

The Place of the Lion. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans*.

War in Heaven. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans*.

Shadows of Ecstasy. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans*.

Descent into Hell. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans*.

The Greater Trumps. New York: Avon*.

All Hallow's Eve. New York: Avon*.

* Paperback edition.